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Bodies in space

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Bodies in Space

An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Visual and Performing Arts
James Madison University

by Nancy Braxton Congrove

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Art, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Statement	4
Body Extended	5
Eventually it had to Come Out	8
Human Sculpture	10
Inner Dialogue	12
Monster Revealed	14
Sad Party	17
Imagined Interiors	19
Bodies in Space	26
Bibliography	27

Acknowledgements

With guidance and support from my committee, especially during studio visits and critiques, I was able to develop an evolving body of work. The countless performances, photo shoots and, experiments that were part of the development of my project would not have been possible without the participants who were willing to wear my costumes. The current and past members of my committee have helped influence my art practice while constantly challenging me to think in new ways.

Statement

Looking to ritual, costuming, and drag, while still using traditional craft processes, my practice reflects imagery from my own narrative with inspiration from history and counterculture movements. I am interested in biomorphic forms and the way the body interacts with the space around them. I want to create shapes that evoke a sense of familiarity, yet remain ambiguous. I have been exploring themes of identity, gender, and growth, through movement, form, shape, space, structure, and performance. Color has recently become an important formal aspect of my work. With this came the possibility for experimentation and collaboration. There is a connection to multiples, in thinking about forms, bodies, and shapes, that is consistent throughout my work. I am interested in creating environments and costumes that reference the function and architecture of the body, especially when thinking about interior spaces. Lygia Clark is an important influence when thinking about my most recent work. She has already built a visual language around her practice and I found that much of her research and explorations could be used to further explain or understand what I am trying to answer through my pieces. Through her works, the object becomes a mediator for participation, and the viewer becomes the participant. Where does the space of the viewer and that of the participant start and stop? What is felt or embodied and what is seen? Who participates? What is the relationship between the body and space? These are some of the questions that drive my making.



Body Extended, detail
Nylon Spandex

Body Extended

I am interested in connecting bodies, or integrating people into a group temporarily, through a relational garment that becomes both a performance and a sculpture. The image of connecting bodies in nature then taking over the landscape is a challenge I am experimenting with. Metaphors of skin relate to these garments, where extension of the body's skin shifts the relationship to things around us. There is a proposition of movement and shared experience when participating in the relational garment.¹ I am interested in forms that reference the body and the way the body interacts with the space around it. There is an invitation for a nonverbal experience through engagement with the forms. Growth, interconnectedness, and temporary community through shared experience are other themes within the work. I am exploring ideas of human interaction, the body, and nature. Body and form are interconnected and an interior space is created and the form maps the space between bodies. I focus on the role of the participant or performer and how the work can engage this person. In thinking about the directive, constraints, and invitation, artists such as Lygia Clark, Erwin Wurm, and Ernesto Neto are influential when considering this way of working. My initial inspiration came from an image of the duotard designed by Rudi Gernreich for 'Inscape,' a ballet by Bella Lewitsky in 1976. Seeing the two-person bodysuit sparked an interest in the conversation that takes place when it becomes a space for multiple bodies. Working with dancers was important because of their awareness of the body and ways to create line, shape and form. The project resulted in creating a costume or vessel for performance through exchange between artist and dancer. I have found that my art practice has developed into something based in performance and collaboration. This

¹ Brett, Guy. "Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body." *Art in America* 82.7 (1994): 56-63. Print.

project has allowed me to experiment with form, body, and movement, as well as performance and the challenge of documentation. I am interested in the dialogue that takes place when working across disciplines.

At first I decided who participated by selecting dancers to wear the garment. Their relationship to the body and space was similar, as they had specialized training and experience with movement. Through the simple directive of asking participants to wear the costume and respond to ideas such as tension, gesture, and shape, the work was really created through movement. I found that in this collaboration my garment became something more than a static object. It had the potential to shift and change based on the movement of the participants alone. During the dancers' first performance in the costume I remember realizing the ideas and language of Lygia Clark's work made sense in a way that I had not experienced before. I understood that the exchange between maker and participant is the moment when the work is finished. I thought a lot about what happens when the participants are less specific and their collective experiences are more diverse. I found that things changed based on relationships between the participants. Those who were not trained to have control over their body in space actually took the most risks because there was not the issue of being right or wrong. To them, it was already a new and strange experience, and being within the space created a sense of freedom to explore, play, and test the boundaries of the costume. Through the experience of repeating the performance with a variety of participants the question of who participates began to impact the outcome of the work.



Eventually it had to Come Out, detail
Nylon Spandex, Acrylic Yarn

Eventually it had to Come Out

I began thinking about the body as a sculptural element as well as the idea of blurring the distinction between the body and the object. In the work of Lygia Clark the object becomes a mediator for participation and there is a performative interactivity between the art object and the spectator.² A relational object is used by participants in service of an experience beyond the immediate materiality of the object; this can be a solo, collaborative, or communal experience. This idea becomes important when reflecting on *Body Extended* and how it led to the development of new questions and explorations. In thinking about who participates, I realized I had not yet experienced what I was asking of anyone who interacted with the costume, and I felt that I could not gain insight into this space without being having my own experience to relate to. Using the wearable from *Body Extended* as a starting point, I created a costume for performance to be worn for the purpose of a solo experience. With one body rather than multiple bodies the idea of control becomes more significant. There was not tension from movements of another body creating an impact on my own. Although it was important to have this experience, I understood that the uncertainty of movement that worked to obscure and morph the body was something that needed to be present in the work. In order to emphasize movement and gesture I needed to move into other media including photo and video. The challenge of documenting ephemeral work is something that continues to evolve in my making.

² Brett, Guy. "Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body." *Art in America* 82.7 (1994): 56-63. Print.

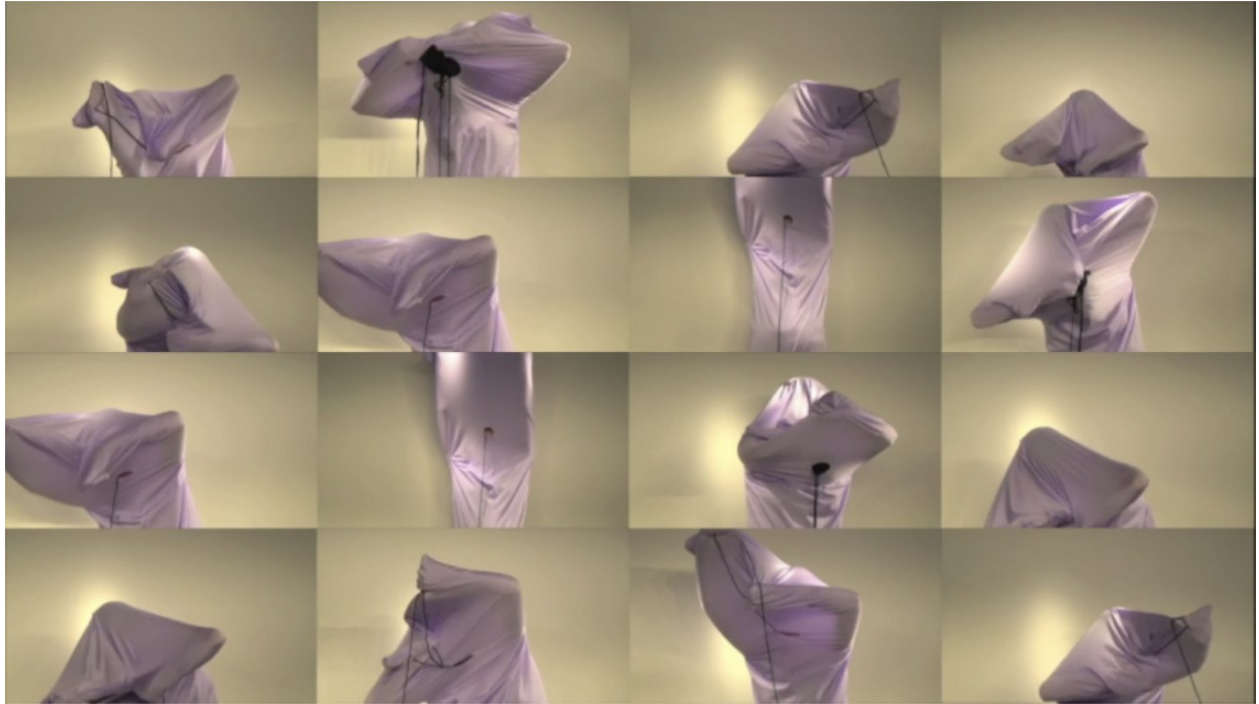
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Human Sculpture
Fabric, Polyfil

Human Sculpture

While still thinking about the relationship to the body and architecture and the question of who participates, I created a wearable garment that is more defined in the way that it modifies or obscures the body. Although the piece can stand alone, it is activated through participation or performance. In this piece the constraints for the participant are more defined, so the interaction involves objects in the space. Through extending the body into another material, I challenge expectations of the viewer in considering the relationship between a sculpture as performance and one that is permanently installed. I was thinking about the question of scale and how that changes based on perspective. The idea that scale becomes important when things are compared is something Jun Kaneko talked about in his lecture I attended a number of years ago. He was the one who got me thinking about the space between or around a form and its potential to become interesting. The challenge of documentation came up with this work, which ended up pushing the project into a new direction. Initially I was asking who will interact with the piece, but later realized that how the piece will react with the space around it was the question I was interested in. When the wearable work was placed in relation to a sculpture, there was a conversation between the pieces. Aesthetically there are formal qualities that connect the pieces, such as line, shape, and texture. Although video seemed like the right way to present the project, I realized that the sculpture originally created from a drawing was lost. I want to present the narrative to the viewer so that not everything is revealed and there is room to take what I have presented and construct a new version of the narrative.



Inner Dialogue
Video Still

Inner Dialogue

Starting with a focus on performance and documenting ephemeral work, my initial exploration resulted in performance documentation, rather than creating a narrative by choreographing and editing moments of the performance. Through reworking the first performance video, Eventually it had to Come Out, I have been figuring out ways to alter the documentation. In my research I have been looking at modern dance and the work of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, as well as Nick Cave's performance pieces and use of the body. I am thinking about translating immaterial notions of language, words and thoughts into something material. The images focus on form, line, and abstracted moments of the body, leaving a more ambiguous and amorphous form. Using specific moments of the documentation allows me to curate the gestures into a new narrative. I was thinking about ways to integrate ideas of multiples while still working with one body. Space becomes important in this piece. With this I began to think about distorting reality. Using moments of the solo experience documentation to create a new work, there is also a sense of absurdity.



Monster Revealed
Acrylic yarn, foam

Monster Revealed

Through my research process I have been doing a lot of reading on the topics of gender, participation in art, and the idea of non-normative or alternative spaces. I found this interesting especially when creating my new forms. I thought about them as costumes where identity is masked and the person inside the form or costume assumes the identity of the form. Another influence was the Cockettes and the way they used drag to create their identity through performance and costume.³ I am thinking about the audience or viewer as collaborator rather than spectator. The forms are still minimalistic, yet the outer layer is expressive and complex. Using traditional craft practices to create a non-traditional object and experience, these forms are not meant to be a sensory deprivation space. The idea of alternative, or different from the conventional and existing outside of established cultural systems can be applied to my work, especially when thinking about alternative spaces used to display or install work. A parade or performance is an alternative way to see the forms and allows the audience to engage and participate while creating a temporary community through a shared experience. The performance or parade where viewers wear the forms can be described as creating a temporary autonomous zone, which can be described as an experience where participants temporarily free themselves from restraints due to social conditioning or a creative event where those present establish new codes of behavior.⁴ Monster Revealed is a wearable sculpture or costume that is displayed on the body. In this piece the body is hidden, allowing the participant to assume the identity of the form. Excess,

³ Auther, Elissa, and Adam Lerner. *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*. Denver, CO: Published in Cooperation with the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, 2012. Print.

⁴ Bey,Hakim. *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1991. Print.

multiples, and repetition were important themes throughout the process of making this piece. The repeated knit shapes become an extension of the body that is also an amorphous form, and the use of multiples carries over from Inner Dialogue. The piece changes with each participant, and question becomes what is the directive? Through earlier explorations I have found the importance of asking who participates, but the directive becomes important in order to take the work beyond a static sculpture. The piece feels incomplete without a more specific directive, which could be in the form of an instructional drawing or a graphic score. Having experienced being inside the piece and how it feels to wear it, the weight of the form becomes interesting. Wearing the piece impacts how the participant can move in space. The extension of their body changes the perception of the body in space, giving a new awareness of the way a body moves through space.



Sad Party, detail
Vinyl, machine embroidery, screen-printing

Sad Party

This series developed out of process drawings based in material exploration. While still looking to counter culture movements including Ant Farm and craft processes, these inflatables become both a drawing and a sculpture.⁵ I am interested in the idea of creating a landscape while still thinking about forms that reference the body, or the idea of skin. This process allowed for a more developed color palette, which is an important formal aspect of the work. Ideas of layering, texture, color and form are particularly important. I see these works as drawings in their expressive nature but also as sculptural forms with an interior and exterior space. The transparent material allows for layering and manipulation of space. The idea of the body as a landscape and my interest in creating an environment has also informed this work. Another important aspect of the process was my focus on the drawings as being objects in space that create a narrative in a sense. The film *Barbarella* as well as the work of Claire Ashley has informed my practice and this project in particular. There is a connection to multiples, in thinking about gesture and shape that is consistent throughout this work. The vinyl acts as a skin, and the transparency of the material allows for both an interior and exterior space.⁶ Traditional mark making techniques in fibers such as embroidery were used in this piece. The gestures created through the use of screen printing and stitching create irregular patterns and movement in the piece. The weight of the layered stitching in combination with the small punctures result in a slow, sad, deflation that gives life to the work. As the air deflates, the piece transforms.

⁵ *Inflatocookbook*. San Francisco: Ant Farm, 1973. Print.

⁶ Brett, Guy. "Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body." *Art in America* 82.7 (1994): 56-63. Print.



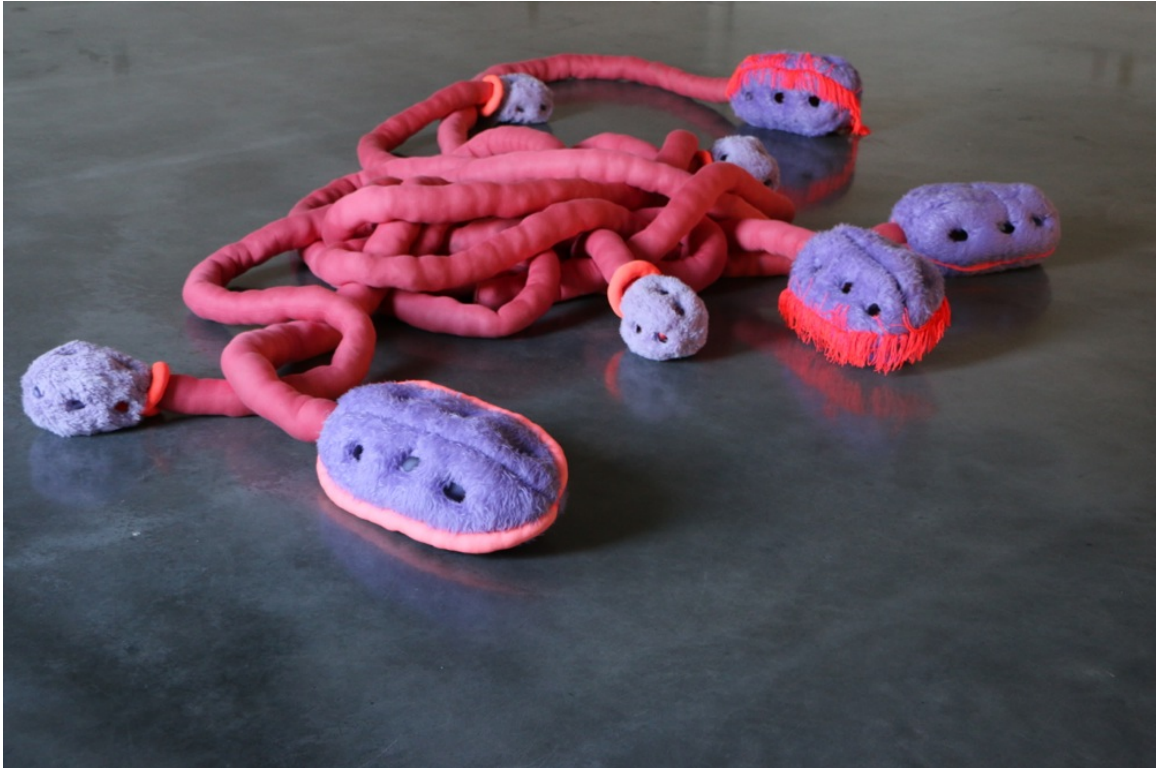
Imagined Interiors
Vinyl, Fur, Spandex

Imagined Interiors

In Neo-Concretism, an influential art movement when thinking about current explorations, the body is in the work. Along with Lygia Clark, Ernesto Neto was at the forefront of this movement. Much of Neto's work is about how art should equate to living organisms. His work asks the viewer to consider where is the inside and outside, and his explorations are a generous invitation to participate. The idea that we must experience objects to see their potential is important in the development of my work. I am creating ambiguous forms that reference the body, while remaining androgynous and absurd. Through both color and material exploration, along with sound, an alternative reality is constructed. With inspiration from Annette Messager's soft sculpture shapes, Ernst Haeckel's life forms in nature drawings, bodies in relation to architecture, strange natural phenomena, and microbes I created an environment⁷. Looking at color, texture and absurdity, the space becomes a distortion of imagined reality filled with excess, piles, and multiples that emits a funky glow. This installation is made up of soft sculpture forms, video projection, sound, and inflatables. The lighting is important because it emphasizes the feeling of entering an environment and makes the shapes come alive. This work references the body and its interior. The sound playing from the soft sculptures is a repeated chewing sound that becomes distorted, referencing digestion, or internal sounds giving the sense of being within an interior space. My research began with scenery shapes in Barbarella and the Inflatocookbook, a guide to inflatable construction. I am considering questions of sound, color, and light and the way those factors influence the environment created. There is a sense of bodily presence with the rhythm of breathing in the large inflatable. Sound becomes important

⁷ Haeckel, Ernst. *Art Forms in Nature*. New York: Dover Publications, 1974. Print.

in this piece, as it becomes the invitation to participate or engage with the work. Both playful and absurd, the work invites viewers to touch and directs viewers to move around in the space. Sound from my own body is recorded and slightly altered, then used to give life to the creature-like sculptures. In reflecting on this work, I found that the environment is not complete. This will lead to further explorations that combine wearable costumes within an environment.



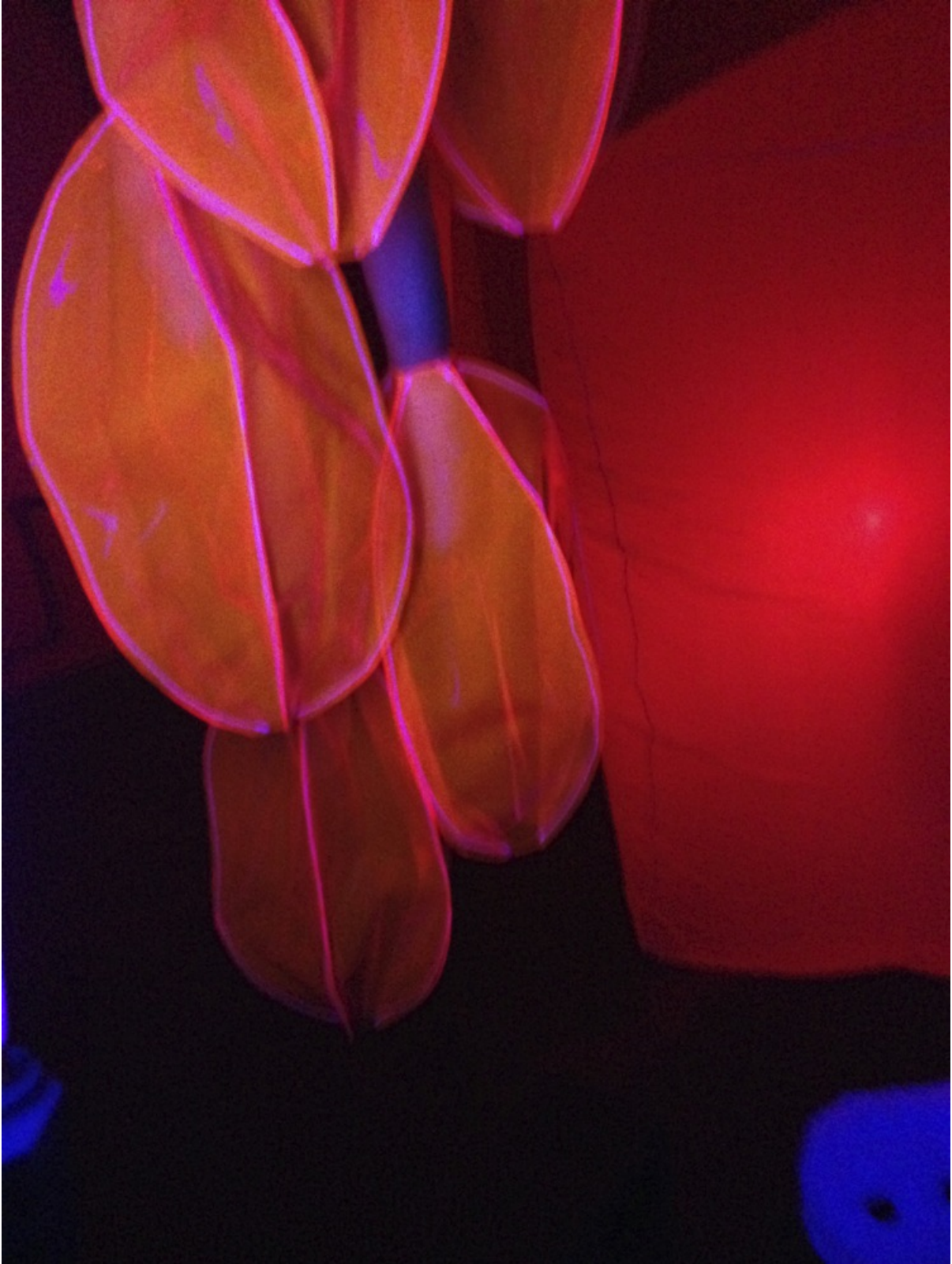
Imagined Interiors, detail
Fur, Spandex, Polyfil



Imagined Interiors
Vinyl, Fur, Nylon Spandex, Video, Sound



Imagined Interiors, detail



Imagined Interiors, detail

Bodies in Space

Through the process of reflecting on the development of these recent explorations, I have found that the questions that drive my making have evolved. I am interested in challenging scale and moving beyond the body as a point of reference, since much of my work was made in relation to the scale of the body. I am thinking about the directive and the role of participants, along with the idea of space. I am considering how the work will change as the context it is in shifts somehow. As my work develops as a result and continuation of recent projects, I want to create my own space for the bodies and costumes. This environment becomes a setting for the performance or interaction.

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